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# Alcohol and culture: An introduction

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The meanings we attach to drinking alcohol and the ways we define alcohol dependence are culturally sensitive. When a person is asked about drinking, the answer is often given as a narrative. For example, one of us (ASN) once asked a patient named Carl to tell the story of his drinking. He answered: “It’s often said that Jeppe drinks. But the question is *why* he drinks”. We understood what he meant, because he had made a reference to a character in a Danish play that all of us knew. He made use of a common cultural reference, a storyline familiar to both speaker and listener. Basically, storylines and fragments of larger master stories provide vital repetitions for upholding cultural mythologies on different phenomena.

Storylines are used “to establish a set of guidelines and constraints for telling a story that conveys what convention would certify as having a certain general kind of content” (Schafer, 1992, p. 29). Individuals use the cultural stock of narratives and myths that is accessible to

them. In a new situation they browse more or less consciously through cultural “warehouses” of narrative models to find one that fits their experience (Hänninen & Koski-Jännes, 1999). The models are tried on, rejected or approved, adjusted or transformed. A storyteller may consciously or unconsciously use a number of storylines and narratives in a personal story, employ storylines originating from cultural artefacts, literature, theatre, folklore, religion, mythology, and mass media (Hydén, 1995; Steffen, 1997).

Narratives about drinking and drinking problems typically convey significations concerning the individual in relation to the drinking habit; for example, whether the individual with the described symptoms and attributes is allowed to assume the role of an alcohol-dependent person (Nielsen, 2003). Secondly, rhetorical effects may influence what is perceived to lead to this state of dependency, what are perceived to be the consequences of it, and what change is

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considered appropriate, such as offer of treatment (Hydén, 1995). Individual trajectories of recovery are not generated *sui generis* but are constructed on the basis of the logics underpinning narrative “maps” (Christensen & Elmeland, 2015; Polner & Stein, 1996; Weegmann & Piwowitz-Hjort, 2009), and beyond the uniqueness of the narratives presented by the individual, certain patterns can be discerned which represent more general styles of self-identification, a shared vocabulary, and ways of talking about alcohol dependence and recovery. Some of these patterns may draw heavily on AA story models (Steffen, 1997; Weegmann & Piwowitz-Hjort, 2009), while others may stem from such treatment modalities as cognitive behavioural therapy (Beck, Wright, Newman, & Liese, 1993), and yet others may come from movies, or from literature, or the mass media (Nielsen, 2003; Warhol, 2002). Hence, individuals may be seen as “theorists of their own life”, who use conceptual cultural frameworks as guidance for understanding their problems in the same way as researchers, who test and modify existing theories or create new ones on the basis of their data (Hänninen & Koski-Jännes, 1999). In other words: we do this in order to understand the way we drink, how we define if and when the drinking becomes problematic, and how we recover – all of which is based on how we interpret the drinking and the situation, and this interpretation is, for its part, based on norms and storylines available from a variety of resources.

In this issue of *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, several articles will address alcohol drinking and alcohol dependency from just as many angles. The idea of this volume was born during a workshop arranged by the Department of Literature and the Unit of Clinical Alcohol Research, University of Southern Denmark, and supported by the Danish National Research Foundation (DNRF102ID). At the workshop, 15 alcohol researchers and literature scholars shared presentations and described the understanding of alcohol use or alcohol problems within their research area/paradigm; how they

approached studies of alcohol culture; and what questions about alcohol use remained debated or unsolved in their research field. The presentations led to new thoughts and insights, raising the idea of not only publishing articles about alcohol from various angles, but also to publish articles together across disciplines.

Hence, this volume contains articles ranging from Anne-Marie Mai’s overview of gender and alcohol as seen through Märta Tikkanen’s poetry collection *The love story of the century* and Henrik Tikkanen’s autobiographies; to the article by Kim Bloomfield on drinking culture in German and Danish regions, based on population survey data. Other articles discuss alcohol and culture from not only the patient or population angles but also from the point of view of literature. Jakob Emiliussen and Alistair David Morrison explore alcohol and masculinity, drawing both on interviews with patients and literary presentations of alcohol.

Jürgen Rehm and Robin Room examine the cultural impact on diagnosis for alcohol use disorder, using Europe as an example. And last, taking a completely different angle, Rikke Hellum and colleagues describe the thought-provoking findings from a small pilot study on adding creative writing workshops, performed by a professional novelist and a professional poet, to treatment for alcohol use disorder. This novel perspective combines literature studies and alcohol studies in a way that adds to the understanding of alcohol’s function in individual lives and in society, and also adds to perspectives on, and perhaps even tools in, treatment.

The diversity of alcohol narratives will always be myriad and infinite. They are told from different perspectives, and when being told, they build on the familiar cultural constructs, material, and storylines in the society which the individual belongs to or is influenced by. Research fields employ their own dominant narratives in explaining addiction, and the individual’s framework for understanding addiction is shaped by the language and ideology of their treatment and self-help milieu (Hammer,

Dingel, Ostergren, Nowakowski, & Koenig, 2012), just as it is shaped by literary narratives (Warhol, 2002), films (Carota & Calabrese, 2013), and the mass media (Hellman & Room, 2015).

The articles presented in this volume may seem disorderly or in disagreement with one another. Perhaps the heterogeneity in angles is an important aspect of alcohol addiction that should not be glossed over in favour of a unified framework, as noted by Hammer and colleagues (Hammer et al., 2012), who argue:

Addiction is not just the disease of one particular organ, not just the result of an unfortunate upbringing, or an unfortunate choice; addiction is not the affliction of, or, what is “the matter” with the ill other, addiction is *a* matter with us. (Hammer et al., 2012, p. 732)

In order to understand the role and impact of alcohol and to understand alcohol dependence and addiction, we need to understand how alcohol is integrated into our culture, and how maybe a particular literature passes that culture on to us.

By combining disciplinary fields and methods we stand a better chance of unravelling the complex relationship between meaning and action and, with this knowledge, we will be in a better position to address substantive questions such as why some individuals drink, why some individuals change, and why some individuals show better compliance in specific treatment modalities than others. And we may be in an even better position if we can manage not only to combine research methods but also to bridge between studies in culture and fictional literature and clinical studies in the fields of addiction.

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